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An Imperative of Humility
What *Ekklesiae* Values Most in its Leaders

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If you should ask me what are the ways of God, I would tell you that the first is humility, the second is humility, and the third is humility. Not there are no other precepts to give, but if humility does not precede all that we do, our efforts are fruitless.

- Saint Augustine

Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

- *Philippians 2:3-4*

Introduction

Ekklesiae, a still-fledgling ministry of just over two years, has as its mission to gather leaders across tradition, culture and generation *who know they need each other* to discern Christ's purposes for His Church in the world. The centrality of *interdependence* to Ekklesiae's mission, I'm increasingly recognizing, is an act of repentance from my own arrogance as a leader and that of the congregational cultures in which I've served. The danger of being well taught is becoming smugly content with what one knows about the gospel, the Church, the nature of mission, about God Himself. I would contend that the long-pervasive need to be right is endemic to American ecclesial culture, and goes a long way to explain the Church's divisive and prophetically-innocuous existence. Humility as a virtue is virtually absent, and to our peril.

For this reason, humility is first among our core values as an organization, and must not only be prayed for, but also practiced. This short paper reflects briefly on humility within the realms of the relational, theological, cultural, spiritual and missional, followed by a summary of ways to exercise humility that we expect, and aspire towards, as Ekklesiae leaders.

Relational Humility

Once we try to strip uncertainty, risk, and emotional exposure from the relational experience, we bankrupt courage by definition[1].

- Brene Brown

In her book, *Daring to Lead*, Brene Brown recounts conversations she's had with engineers tasked with the responsibility of eliminating "systems vulnerability," which is industry jargon for ensuring that nothing screws up. She was quick to point out that engineers, however, are not alone in striving for invulnerability, particularly in the realm of relationships. Brown posits, however, that courageous leadership is not about somehow circumventing failure but rather, *assuming* failure as inherent to the human experience. In other words, either we choose vulnerability as leaders, or it - inevitably - chooses us.

Generationally speaking, embracing weakness is particularly difficult for those of us in the Boomer generation, where we grew up within a prevailing ethos of "rugged individualism" and post-WWII American triumphalism. Therefore, *take the bull the horns* and *don't screw up*, were the mantras we lived under and, consciously or not, tried to pass on to our children. Millennials and especially Gen Z have long since wised up to the fallacies of the American success myth, and now long for older generations to lose their need to be "put together" and instead to be more real, more authentic, more emotionally accessible, that is, *human*.

The ancient wisdom, "faithful are the wounds of a friend, but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful (Proverbs 27:6)" compels us toward relational humility, a posture we believe to be critical to the ministry of Ekklesiae. We come to the table knowing our fundamental and ongoing need for "course correction," and therefore seek, and make possible, the kind of enduring gospel friendship where the truth is graciously and willingly given and received.

[1] Brene Brown, *Dare to Lead* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2018), p.28.

Theological Humility

Indeed, the body does not consist of one member but of many [therefore] the eye cannot say to the hand, "I have no need of you" nor again the head to the feet, "I have no need of you."

- The Apostle Paul, 1st letter to the Corinthians

To live in Corinth in Paul's day, was to exist in a marketplace of ideas, a constellation of competing schools of thought where depths of insight and eloquence of speech were that which separated the pedestrian from the prestigious. The apostle faced a divided congregation where some touted their association with himself, others with Apollos, some with Cephas and still others most pretentiously, "with Christ." To this, Paul condemns their worldly veneration of knowledge, and elevates the cross as that which defines God's ultimate wisdom. It is in this context that he must remind them that they are all parts of one body, and thus all are needed.

Christian social psychologist, Christina Cleveland, writes plainly of our habit of dividing the Church into "two types of Christians: the wrong kind and the right kind of Christian[2]" and sticking only with those with whom we feel theologically (or otherwise) comfortable with. She says, "We have Reformed churches, black churches, Chinese churches, Pentecostal churches, but we rarely engage in meaningful interactions outside of our [immediate] church groups.[3]" Here I would explicitly add Anabaptist, Orthodox and Catholic churches to her list. The problem, as Cleveland elucidates, is not myriad ways in which we differ, but that we allow our differences to divide rather than bless. We come to understand God and His purposes more clearly when we can see and experience Him through multiple lenses. For this reason, Ekklesiae is intentional about crossing traditions - especially theological ones - at its gatherings, and insists that leaders come to the table actively expecting to learn from the perspectives of the others.

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[2] Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ: Uncovering the Hidden Forces That Keep Us Apart* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2013), p.15.

[3] Ibid, p.35.

Cultural Humility

Because culture and religion are so easily confused, many American Christians have automatically and unknowingly adopted a Western cultural viewpoint on Christian faith that significantly differs from other cultural viewpoints. This is a problem for cross-cultural interactions in the Church[4].

- Christina Cleveland, *Disunity in Christ*

To engage culture, *the customary beliefs, social norms, and material traits of a racial, religious or social group* (according to Merriam-Webster) is to appreciate its power to shape who we are and how we perceive and navigate our worlds. To practice cultural humility as Ekklesiae, therefore is to acknowledge and fully own the fact that our social locations, ethnic identities, ancestral histories, in all their beauty and ugliness, have equipped each of us with *a* perspective, not *the* perspective, through which we understand God, His purposes, the broken creation we all inhabit, and the role God has for us in it - as individuals, the sub-groups we might each somehow represent, and the Church as a whole. In other words, no one of us has the complete picture of reality but, collectively, there is hope for a much fuller picture.

The clarion call, in recent years, particularly among our emerging generations, has been to "decolonize Christianity," the need for which has come into sharper focus with the growing recognition of American evangelical entanglement with political power and nationalism, and its roots in our nation's history of eurocentric racial capitalism. Importantly, this has given rise to renewed interest in America's long shadow of racism, not only as it has played out in black and white relations, and the continent's indigenous and those of Latin America and the Pacific Islands, but also the immigration stories of Latino and Asian communities as well.

While critical examination of America's painful past is necessary work, cultural humility also requires each of us to interrogate our own complicities, culturally-shaped reflexes, and participation in power dynamics that are not worthy of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

[4] Ibid, p.145.

Spiritual Humility

What Paul is saying, and what Moses' life illustrates, is that when we set out to do good but carry out our attempts without the discipline of attending to what lies beneath and opening it up to God's presence, evil is always close at hand[5].

- Ruth Haley Barton

Psalm 139, in recent years, has become particularly formative as I consider the nature of ministry and leadership. More than another Psalm, David delves into his understanding and experience of an intensely intimate God who not only painstakingly and lovingly created him, but also remains with him in his every step of life. It is a profoundly important truth for David, in that he lives in a dark and violent world, full of enemy threats, and he needs to know that God has his back. But another powerful dimension is a deep awareness of his interior life, that is, the reality of a soul that needs tending as expressed in the last verse: "Search me O God, and know my heart. Test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." In short, for David, evil does not only exist *out there*, but also within.

For this reason, Ruth Haley Barton maintains that "the soulful leader pays attention to such inner realities and the questions that they raise rather than ignoring them and continuing the charade or judging himself or herself harshly and thus cutting off the possibility of deeper awareness. Spiritual leadership emerges from our willingness to stay involved with our own soul - that place where God's Spirit is at work stirring up our deepest questions and longings to draw us deeper into relationship with Him.[6]" In other words, spiritual humility assumes that sin is always at work within us - it will leak out one way or another - and thus need the Spirit's daily work in our lives. It also assumes that such work does not come easily, in particular because of the resistance of our wills. Thus, as Ekklesiae leaders, we shall take our own spiritual formation seriously, as well as the role we play as spiritual companions for one another as a community.

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[5] Ruth Haley Barton, *Strengthening the Soul of Your Leadership* (Downer's Grove, InterVarsity Press, 2008). p.43.
[6] Ibid, p.25.

Missional Humility

The Church should expect to change as it interacts with its community and environment. The Church should expect to change as growth and development take place through its ministry. And the Church should expect to change as the Spirit works to bring about transformed lives living out a new nature[7].

- Craig Van Gelder

According to missiologist Craig Van Gelder, malleability is critical to the work of the Church in all of its forms. For him, flexibility is not merely the latest, innovative strategy for organizations to adopt, as in the growing movement of "adaptive leadership" within both secular and ecclesiastical managerial literature. Rather, change is inherent to human existence and a Creator who is actively involved with the whole of creation, its inhabitants, and their redemption. In short, nothing in life and ministry is static because we follow a God who is on the move.

This truth is not easy for leaders like me who have taken pride in articulating air-tight systems of ministry (e.g. "ecclesio-centered mission") and implementing programs to substantiate such claims. Such attachment to one's sense of things becomes even more strident when ego, national attention, or financial security (or prosperity) is at stake. To be sure, the American evangelical landscape is littered with the overstock and debris of so many best-selling book titles, workshop series, DVD sets, and promotional packages touting the latest and greatest answer for congregational growth or evangelistic success. Reality proves to be a moving target.

The apostle Paul, on the other hand, in his ministry among the Corinthian congregation, determined to "know nothing among [them] except Christ and Him crucified (1 Corinthians 2:2)." For Paul, the efficacy of the cross and the Holy Spirit was what empowered and led his ministry. Taking his cue, this is what we want for Ekklesiae, an organic and malleable ministry that requires nothing more than that we together, as leaders, listen to our context, lean into the Spirit, take faithful steps of faith, and pay attention to what God is doing among us.

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[7] Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Publishing Company, 2008), p.155.

Humility in Practice

Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another,
for God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.

1 Peter 5:5

The problem with blind spots is that we do not know how big they might be, or how important the areas are that they prevent us from seeing...But if our past experiences have instructed us well - and humbled us sufficiently - we will not be content with static, self-perpetuating, self-validating understandings of the Word of God but instead, in submission to the Lord Jesus Christ, seek a fuller revelation of His will and ways by the means which He has provided in the fullness of the Body of Christ...those who stand outside of our own cultural milieu in significant ways and are well-positioned to speak prophetically on behalf of our Lord[8].

- Rev. Bill Betts

The task of seeking "fuller revelation of His will and ways," according to Ekklesiae co-founder, Rev. Bill Betts, requires that we reject our limited self-understanding as adequate and, instead, purpose to bring those outside of our personal milieu into the exegetical inquiry. It is not enough, however, to simply gather a group of diverse players into the room (or Zoom call, as it were, in these days of pandemic) and hope for fruitful and generative dialogue. It requires personal commitment on the part of each conversational participant to "clothe themselves with humility" in their interactions and relationships with the others. Such clothing, of course, begs specificity. What would the practice of humility look like in a Christ-centered conversation? Below is a proposed list (a living document) of shared assumptions and commitments for all leaders who gather together around the Ekklesiae table:

1. We are all followers of Jesus Christ who seek to experience the fullness of salvation in Him and the implications of His lordship in our lives and in our world.

2. Together with the whole of His Church, we affirm the Apostle's Creed: We believe in God, the Father almighty, Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, his only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Spirit, born of the Virgin Mary, suffered under Pontius

[8] Rev. Bill Betts, *The Doctrine of Scripture in the Global Theater-in-the-Round* (Article, May 2016), p.5.

Pilate, was crucified, died and was buried; he descended into hell; on the third day he rose again from the dead; he ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right hand of God the Father almighty; from there he will come to judge the living and the dead. I believe in the Holy Spirit, the holy catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting.

3. We look to the Bible, the Holy Scriptures (as composed of the traditionally accepted canons of the Old and New Testament) as primary and authoritative for all matters of Christian faith, life, mission and witness in the world.

4. We can assume that we come with theological differences and disagreements with regard to many things, including political ideology, human sexuality, liturgical practices, role and nature of the sacraments, but will nonetheless embrace each other as brothers and sisters in Christ.

5. We recognize that our differences are shaped by our experiences, our cultural histories, our social locations, and therefore have stories to be learned, honored, and received as necessary to hear one another. Toward this end, we will continue to examine our own cultural identities.

6. We will assume that because of, not despite, our differences, we need each other ("The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you'…" – 1 Cor. 12:21) for deeper knowledge of God and His purposes. Therefore, we will enter into our conversations quicker to listen than to speak. We shall make it of utmost priority that every voice around the table is heard.

7. Taking our own spiritual formation seriously, we come to the table believing that the Holy Spirit is present, active, and not working at cross-purposes with Himself. Therefore, we can together ask Him for a word about what we, His Church, are being called to (and away from) for the sake of gospel fidelity and witness for this time and place in our world.